Changing Institutional Research Strategies

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Introduction

> How have institutional research strategies affected scholarly communications, if at all?
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> How have changes in scholarly communications affected institutional research strategies?

This chapter addresses these two questions, and looks at the recent evolution of the institutional research strategy to do so.

University research strategies (and their parent institutional strategies) have tended not to consider directly scholarly communication. Rather, they have tended to be statements about undertaking high quality, relevant research, and translating it into practice or other beneficial outcomes. It is implicit that the results of research will be disseminated, but little attention is paid to how, why, and through what media.

At one level, this is neither surprising, nor concerning. Indeed, the academic community might be more worried if their institutional strategy became too prescriptive. However, there are two related arguments to be made for more explicit inclusion of scholarly communication in institutional research strategies.

The first is that we (and others) should not forget the very nature of scholarly enquiry, and the development and dissemination of knowledge. Universities must retain this as a core element, and thus explicitly state their commitment to its fulfilment. Institutional commitments to open access to their research results fall into this category, and are becoming more common. Recent Government and funder policy statements[2] reinforce this.

The second is that the strategy will need to address the interaction of its researchers and their research with broad, non-academic communities, and hence the appropriate forms of communication for these audiences will need to be explicit. There could be a danger that all institutional communication activity would concentrate on this area, and hence not attempt to support the communication of the scholarly content to scholarly audiences. It is therefore important to articulate clearly the modes and purposes of communication in support of the research endeavour.

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[2] The Finch Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings published its report in July 2012 (http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf) and made a number of recommendations that have been accepted by Government. The Government statement is available at http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/science/docs/l/12-975-letter-government-response-to-finch-report-research-publications.pdf, and the UK Research Councils' revised policy is at http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/Pages/outputs.aspx. The European Commission has also announced its policy in this area (see http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/12/790).

The Institutional Research Strategy and Policy Infrastructure

Before discussing the connection of research strategy to scholarly communication, it is important to take account of the full panoply of institutional strategy and policy mechanisms and documentation, in order to understand the purposes and inter-relationships of all the elements.

Strategies and operational plans provide the vision, end points, and specific actions. Policies should provide the desired behavioural environment: motivating staff to develop appropriate personal contributions. They need to be aligned with the strategic vision in terms of what is permitted and with the implementation plan in terms of how it is delivered.

The "Need" for a Research Strategy

There has been an increasing need, or at least pressure, for institutions to have a research strategy, arising from a number of quarters:

- Research is increasingly in a policy-driven environment, with governments and funders expecting or requiring an institution to have a strategy in order to qualify for funding;
- Institutions are becoming more active in managing their research, in particular as they have to address questions of resource prioritisation;
- Greater levels of regulation and legislation require translation into the institutional policy framework;
- There is more interest in managing the whole lifecycle of research and knowledge exchange.

An example of externally-driven strategy development was the introduction of the Joint Infrastructure Fund in 1998 by the UK Funding Bodies, the Research Councils, and the Wellcome Trust. This scheme, which funded major research infrastructure such as buildings and large equipment, required the research strategy to be submitted as part of the proposal so that alignment could be demonstrated. This caused a number of universities to write their first explicit research strategy.

What is a Research Strategy?

A university's research strategy is often a formal, public document, suggesting where the institution wishes to be, and how it will measure its success in getting there. By their nature, such documents can be bland, and end up trying to contain messages for different audiences, both internal and external. In some cases, they can amount to New Year's Resolutions: aspirations not achievable, or not followed through.

There may, therefore, be one or more, more detailed, internal documents, at institutional and departmental levels, which express more directly what is being planned. These are unlikely to be published outside the institution, and may not even be fully revealed internally. At the institutional level, they will be broad, whereas at a departmental level, they are more likely to be a collection of individual and team aspirations, as that is the nature of the academic research environment.

A strategy might have targets for specific subject areas, although these are usually better at the departmental level than at the institutional level: "being the best in X" can be difficult to substantiate; it can also be a hostage to fortune. Conversely, an institution can aim to provide the right environment for success, and might use a number of action areas or critical success factors, such as:

- People (recruiting, developing, rewarding and retaining);

Infrastructure (the physical environment and the human support structures);
Resources (having the funds to invest in the people and the infrastructure);
Institutional Management (appropriate, motivational leaders at all levels, including succession planning);
Key Strategic Relationships (major interactions that determine ability to deliver or represent significant customers for a range of institutional products);
Market Positioning (determining the type of organisation one wants to be).

What Makes it Work?

A strategy needs to be meaningful to those whom it affects. This may mean the need for different versions for different audiences. This is not to say that the strategic direction is different, just what is emphasised and how it is expressed. This is another reason for having both institutional and departmental strategies. Equally important is to have an implementation plan, as this identifies the specific tasks and actions that will be undertaken to make a difference. It is usually also easier to measure performance against the actions in the implementation plan than against the broader aspirations in the strategy.

The final aspect required is an enabling policy environment that motivates staff to develop personal contributions (again reflecting the nature of academic research). Policies should define what's "acceptable", what's "expected", and how it is rewarded. They might be divided into two categories: formal institutional policies that are part of an employee's terms and conditions of employment, or a student's terms of registration; and operational mechanisms that define how processes should work.

Institutional policies include a wide range of areas, and are typically the way in which external regulation is implemented. Policies should be a framework, with an amount of flexibility, to recognise differences between subjects, the changing nature of the research environment, and the inter-connected nature of the drivers of individuals' behaviour.

Measuring Progress

As already noted, measuring progress is easier against specific actions (Did it happen? Did it have the desired effect?), although the institutional strategy should have objectives with measurable targets. One can choose whether to measure inputs, outputs or outcomes, or a combination. Equally, one can measure absolute or comparative performance. Each has their place. Similarly, quality and volume of activity are both relevant (e.g. peer review assessments, citations, postgraduate research student completions per academic, external income per academic), but so is having an understanding of the state of the infrastructure (hence capital spend per academic can be tracked).

Connecting Strategy and Planning

One of the challenges we face is the differing timescales of the processes. Strategy is often presented in terms of five or ten years, whereas most institutions have an annual planning process that may use a rolling three-year period, but be linked to a one-year budgeting process (the latter in particular because of the cycle of allocations from government through the Funding Bodies).

Research is a highly complex, behavioural system, which needs to be integrated, and managing creativity needs a subtlety of approach. All of the elements of the strategy and policy infrastructure need to be pointing in the same direction, and to leave plenty of room for individual and organisational expression.

How Might Scholarly Communication be Represented in a Research Strategy?

The research strategy should be regarded as a public document, where an institution to state its commitment to scholarly communication. It does not need to be detailed, but should lie at the heart of an institution's research and knowledge exchange objectives. Having a clear statement reinforces the purpose of the research at the institution: to discover new knowledge and to share it in meaningful ways. Scholarly communications are about documenting and sharing that discovery. The current and future challenge will be in ensuring that the sharing is meaningful and plural.

Any statement on scholarly communication might be coupled with the institutional commitment to academic freedom, in terms of the freedom to express (informed) views. Scholarly outputs are one important form of embodiment of such expressions.

Perhaps a more interesting question relates to the purpose of scholarly communications, and how that might be changing. Some parts of the answer to this question will be the same as they were at the time of the first publication of *Philosophical Transactions* in 1665; other parts, however, might reflect different drivers. More specifically:

> To publish the results of research, to assure their quality, and to enable their replication, understanding and use by others.
>
> To provide information on specific projects and activities, and their outcomes.
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> To demonstrate areas of interest and capability, hence provide information for potential collaborators, funders, or customers.

In the 17^{th}, 18^{th}, and 19^{th} Centuries, scholars tended to be polymaths, with significant applied interests. The trend through the 20^{th} Century has been narrowing and deepening, and yet with a desire to interact across disciplines. Separately, there have been societal (usually governmental) imperatives to enable practical application of research. Institutional research strategies respond to each of these tendencies, seeking to demonstrate and support depth, interconnectedness, and transferability of their research. In that context, what is the expectation of scholarly communications, and indeed of other forms of communication? Where does scholarly communication sit in a continuum of communications, and what relationship does it need to have to the other parts? It is certain that it needs to be adequately integrated, rather than the scholarly community believing that it can be maintained in semi-isolation in order to retain purity.

Scholarly communication is not only about the dissemination to other scholars. It is (or certainly should be) about the informed dissemination to a range of audiences, for multiple purposes. This is not to say that every item of communication has to be presented for a tabloid audience, but it should be understandable and accessible.

A recent report commissioned by JISC on behalf of the Open Access Implementation Group[3] found that private sector users of scholarly outputs had difficulty in understanding the potential value of an article from the abstract, because of the way it was written. (The report was written in the context of access to scholarly output, on which more below. It found that discoverability and transparency were also issues, alongside ease of access.) This

[3] Benefits to the Private Sector of Open Access to Higher Education and Scholarly Research, A Research Report to JISC from HOST Policy Research, October 2011. http://open-access.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/OAIG_Benefits_OA_PrivateSector.pdf

illustrates the inter-sectoral communication requirements, but similar comments might apply to inter-disciplinary use of scholarly outputs within the academic sector. There is thus a responsibility to ensure that scholarly outputs are understandable, including to non-traditional audiences. Ironically, perhaps, there has been a growing market for coffee table books and TV programmes based on scholarly subjects and studies, but these are possibly looked down upon by the purist. In the current UK context, these may not count for much in the assessment of outputs in the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[4], but they might help to demonstrate public engagement in the (non-academic) impact element of that assessment.

One effect of this might be for an institution (or, perhaps better, publishers) to require a truly lay abstract of each article that is produced. Would that not demonstrate commitment to open scholarship, public engagement, and inter-disciplinary transparency?

Repositories, Open Access and Scholarly Communication

Many institutions have established institutional repositories, partly to catalogue their research outputs, and partly to provide access to the contents, where permitted by the publisher's copyright. In doing so, an institution is likely to have introduced a policy on whether staff are required to record their research outputs in the repository, and some include an encouragement or requirement to deposit the full text documents.

Such policy requirements may not be included in a research strategy, but, as discussed earlier, the policy should support a strategic objective, which will be in the research strategy. The rise of the repository is partly a consequence of the Open Access movement, but also because institutions are more concerned to ensure that they have a full knowledge of their scholarly outputs. That requirement has been driven by external assessments such as the REF and its predecessors, but also through internal promotion and reward systems. Both of these are strategic drivers: the demonstration of quality, and the retention of high performers.

Open Access is promoted by a range of individuals and groups, but institutional responsibility, or evangelism even, often lies with the Library, rather than being fully embedded in the research culture. The institutional research strategy may have a role to play in this respect – the public position statement – but academic commitment to Open Access will only truly happen once the academic community believes that there is no negative effect (and preferably sees a positive effect) on their standing, and that there is no direct cost to them.

Where Does Scholarly Communication Fit in the Wider Institutional Communications Strategy?

Institutional communications have taken off in recent years, to promote the institution. However, these have varied from a student- and parent-centric approach (to support recruitment), to a public profile, to a reactive, damage-limitation process. In some cases, the institution promotes its research, but without specific audience targeting. In others, the targets are clear.

University press offices typically seek to promote new scholarly publications, but the link between the researcher and the press team is often weak. The journal article or book needs

[4] REF is the UK's periodic national assessment of research quality, used to inform core research funding allocation. See www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref.

an amount of translation before it can be used in a general pubic context, and yet the timescale is often very tight, because the press team have not been alerted to the imminent publication. The latter is understandable, but certainly fixable in the majority of cases: there is often considerable lag between an article being accepted and being published. So if an institution is capturing publication information during its development (rather than only after publication), then the repository could automatically alert the press team once an item is fit to be publicised. This would provide the press team with longer to develop a better story, to place in a number of different locations, and thus enhance the reach of the scholarly article.

A related factor is the targeting of outlets. Press offices, naturally, tend to target the mainstream press, whether locally or nationally. While this has value, some also employ more discrimination, and seek to place items in relevant trade journals or in official documents. The call for vignettes to be embedded in official and semi-official publications is often at short notice; some institutions seem to be better able to respond than others, and doing so increases the visibility of the institution's research. This depends on having a good knowledge of one's research activities and outputs, and easy access to understandable summaries.

In developing an institutional research strategy and related infrastructure, one might consider developing the "research requirements of communications", in order to provide some clarity (and performance measures) about the forms, frequency and volume of communications activity. This might integrate the volume and quality of scholarly communications with the wider communication of research activity and outputs, covering internal and external information exchange, through a variety of media.

Conclusions

Returning to the opening questions, have institutional research strategies affected scholarly communications, and *vice versa*? There probably has not been that much effect in either direction so far. However, we are beginning to see more agency in the institutional research strategy, and the need to evolve scholarly communications. These two trends will see greater coupling between the institutional research strategy and scholarly communications. Universities are seeking to differentiate themselves, and their approach to research communications and scholarly communications might help them achieve this. An institution might ask itself how to make best use of its research to demonstrate quality, relevance, and accessibility? What strategies, policies, processes, and infrastructure should be in place?

Equally, an individual researcher might ask himself how he can ensure that his research appears in the best possible locations and forms, so that it is recognised by peers and potential collaborators, current and future employers, current and future funders, those who might find it useful, and the general public in this country and internationally.

This contrasting of institutional versus individual perspectives shows that it is in the institutional interest to ensure that the individual's goals are met. they are after all the unit of research which underpins the institutional research strategy and determines its success. Scholarly communications and institutional research strategies can and should indeed sit comfortably together. Successful institutions and individuals will ensure that the two are mutually supportive.